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The disadvantagement of American Indian youth has long been of concern to various researchers. The major findings of recent research related to the achievement of Indian students in school are summarized in an effort to describe the extent of their disadvantagement. Nearly all of the studies reviewed showed the Indian student to be far behind other students in achievement. On standardized tests, Indian children tend to do very poorly when compared with state and national scores compiled by the rest of the relevant stratum of the school population. Research has also indicated that generally the gap between the levels of achievement of the white and Indian students widens as they progress through school. High dropout rates among the Indian students were also revealed. The dropout rate for the Indian female is considerably higher than it is for the Indian male student. Although a smaller proportion than white students graduate, Indian high school graduates have a high percentage enrolled in academic or vocational programs upon graduation. However, later studies revealed that many of these Indians were unemployed or underemployed. (CM)

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ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS--REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH

by

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ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS--REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH

by

Everett D. Edington *

The most disadvantaged group of youth in the schools of our nation is the American Indian. This paper will summarize the major findings of recent research related to the achievement of Indian students in school.

The Indian is at a great disadvantage when compared with the general population of the United States. His income is only two-ninths as much, and his unemployment rate is almost ten times greater. He has less than half the level of schooling with a dropout rate that is double that of the total population. Although his birth rate is double, he has an expected life of seven years less than other Americans. Half again as many of his infants die, and tuberculosis strikes seven times as many of his people. (1)

The schools provided for the Indians have historically been operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the church. In modern times, however, the public schools have assumed more of the responsibility of educating the Indian children. In 1966, there were 61.3 percent of the Indian children in public schools, 32.6 percent in Bureau schools, and 6.1 percent in mission schools. (15) Those students enrolled in the public schools are increasing at a faster rate than either the B.I.A. or mission

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schools. There are some B.I.A. and mission schools which have been abolished, and the children are attending the public schools. An example of this is at Ft. Thomas, Arizona, where the Apache children from the Bylas area are now nearly all attending the public schools near the reservation. (14)

Throughout the various Indian tribes, low levels of educational achievement are found. A representative example of this is evidenced in the results of a study by Harkins and Wax. They found at Blue Pine, Minnesota, that only twelve percent of the surveyed Indian household heads had completed the twelfth grade.

ACHIEVEMENT

Nearly all of the studies reviewed showed the Indian student to be far behind the other students in achievement.

Berry (2) has shown that in the last forty years nearly all research has shown the Indian student to be inferior to the white student in academic achievement. Regardless of the instruments or criteria used, they show a lower achievement record. He also pointed out that those Indian students who achieve the highest in school are those whose educational and cultural backgrounds are most like the white students.

Until recently, one of the most significant studies was done by Coombs, Kron, Collister, and Anderson (4) in 1958. They collected information on a total of 23,608 pupils, of which fifty-eight percent were Indian and forty-two percent were white. Of the Indian students,

sixty-three percent were attending Federal schools, twenty-three percent were attending public schools, and fourteen percent were attending mission schools. Ninety-four percent of the white students were attending public schools.

The pupils were given the complete battery of the California Achievement Tests which measure learning in the basic skills. The hierarchy of order of achievement of the groups was as follows: (1) white pupils in public schools; (2) Indian pupils in public schools; (3) Indian pupils in Federal schools; and (4) Indian pupils in mission schools.

Indian children tend to do very poorly on standardized tests when compared with state and national scores compiled by the rest of the relevant stratum of the school population.

Blue Pine Indian and white students in the same grades were locally compared on several tests, using universal samples of Indian children and a random sample of white children. The findings seemed to be similar to those on the national level. (8)

The research has seemed to indicate that generally the gap between the levels of achievement of the white and Indian students widens as they progress through school. Berry (2) pointed out a number of studies which show that at the lower grades Indian students are "attentive, busy, and happy," while those in the intermediate grades appear to be "shy, withdrawn, stupid, and sullen." Coombs (4) and Smith (15) found that Indian students showed less of a lag behind other students

at the elementary grades, but that this increased through junior and senior high school. In his extensive review, Berry (2) pointed out that the findings of Bryde which indicated that Sioux pupils were found to achieve satisfactorily for several years, especially from grades four through six, and then at about grades seven and eight began a steady decline in achievement which continued to grade twelve. This was also accompanied by a high dropout rate.

The evaluation of the program at the Ft. Thomas schools in Arizona (14) did not follow the usual pattern. The teachers were made aware of the cultural differences of the Indian students, and the school initiated specific programs to help them. The gap did not widen in a two-year program, and on arithmetic reasoning and spelling it narrowed significantly. This goes along with the findings of Coombs (4) that Indian students compared best to white students in arithmetic and spelling. Coombs indicated the possible reason is that both arithmetic and spelling are learned within the school and by a rote method.

Coombs (4), Townsend (16), and Silvanoli (14) each found that the Indian students showed the greatest difference when compared to white students in reading readiness and comprehension. In each case they were significantly lower, and the gap widened as they progressed through school. Coombs (4) and Townsend (16) both found that by the time the Indian students reached high school they were nearly five years behind the white students in reading scores.

Miller (10) found that in each of the schools he studied, non-Indian pupils scored higher than those Indian pupils with whom they had shared the same classrooms and teachers in grades one through eight. This does not support the theory that Indian pupils differ merely because they attend schools with different quality instruction. He concluded that lower alienation, higher achievement, and higher vocational maturity of integrated Indian pupils over non-integrated pupils were directly related not only to socio-cultural differences, but also to the exposure of these pupils, primarily through school, to integrated circumstances. While significant differences were found between integrated and segregated Indian pupils in achievement, no such difference could be found between the same pupils in intelligence.

Coombs (4) and Smith (15) each indicate that in addition to the gaps which widen between the white and Indian students, the Indian comes to school at least one year behind the whites. Many schools provide for a pre-first grade for the Indians before they enter the regular first grade classroom. Coombs (4) and Smith (15) both also showed that Indian students tend to do better in public schools than in Bureau or mission schools. Care should be taken in coming to any conclusion as a result of this information because it is well known, as Coombs (4) points out, that the Federal schools along with the mission schools are enrolling the least acculturated Indian pupils.

DROPOUTS

Each of the studies reviewed showed high dropout rates among the Indian students. Coombs (4), Kutsche (9), Owens (11), Field Technical Section, Branch of Education, B.I.A. (6), and Selinger (12) each indicated that their dropout rate was higher than that of white students. Kutsche (9) found that not only do Cherokee high school students drop out at a higher rate in all grades than white students do, but the difference is statistically different at very high levels for all grades but the twelfth, and satisfies the usual test of significance even there.

In a study which followed the same students for a five-year period, Selinger (12) found the following dropout rates for Indian students: grade 8, 11.9 percent; grade 9, 9.9 percent; grade 10, 13.7 percent; grade 11, 13.1 percent; and grade 12, 12.1 percent, for a total dropout rate of 60.7 percent, with a 48.8 percent dropout for high school students. This ranged from 29.3 in Oregon to 57.8 percent in South Dakota. Owen and Bass (11), in a study of Southwestern Indians for the same five-year period, found the rate to be 38.66 percent with the highest rate at the eighth grade with 11.7 percent. The B.I.A. (6) found in 1959 that less than 40 percent of the Indian youth who enter high school stay to graduate.

Selinger (12) reported that the dropout rate for the Indian female student is considerably higher than it is for the Indian male student. For the general population the reverse is true. Owens and Bass (11) reported the male and female dropout rate to be the same.

The Wisconsin State Employment Service (17) concluded the largest number of Indian youth who leave school prior to graduation do so to find work, or because they lack interest in school. Problems reportedly stem from the emphasis in today's schools on pre-college work rather than vocational training, and a lack of pre-school training and motivation. Owens and Bass (11) reported that most of the dropouts had few, if any, opportunities to develop marketable skills, and to enjoy self-realization commensurate with their inherent talents and abilities.

INDIAN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

Fairly high percentages of Indian high school students continue academic or training programs following graduation. It should be remembered, however, that a smaller proportion than white students even graduate. In 1959 the B.I.A. (6) reported that forty-two percent of the 1958 graduates had entered training beyond high school. Selinger (13) reported that in 1968, seventy percent continued into academic or training programs. He indicated there were extremely high dropout rates, especially in the academic programs, and about half of those who entered post-high school education completed their training. The large majority completed the technical-vocational programs.

Smith (15) reported that thirty-two percent of the Indians in Southwestern colleges and universities during the period of 1958-62 were on academic probation, compared to two percent of the non-Indians.

In his synthesis, Berry (2) found a number of studies which followed up the Indian graduates. Most of these indicated that, of those who had received post-high school education, many were still unemployed or under-employed.

Woods and Harkins (18) reported that both non-high school graduates and high school graduates are predominately employed at blue-collar work, although high school graduates reveal some tendency to hold higher skill-level jobs. Neither group appears to have entered the white-collar ranks to any significant extent.

They noted that the formal educational process for substantial numbers of urban Indian Americans in both Minneapolis and Chicago did not seem to be working very well, especially when judged in terms of the employment outcome of educational achievement. Evidence shows that urban Indians as a group do not gain from their formal schooling the equipment needed to survive and prosper in an urban environment. (18)

Selinger (13) found that approximately six years after high school graduation, slightly less than one-half of the females, and slightly more than one-half of the males were employed for pay or profit. The majority were in low pay, nonpermanent jobs, and three-fifths were living on or near a reservation. Two-thirds of the males and one-third of the females accepted employment unrelated to their training. Most who accepted this type of employment did so to be near their home reservation.

The studies reported in this paper all point out the fact that our educational programs do not seem to be preparing the Indian students to take their place in the economy of our nation. A number of experimental programs are in progress, with others in the planning stages. None have been in operation long enough to determine their effectiveness.

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